

**DATE OF EASTER
AND
CALENDAR REVISION IN THE
ORTHODOX CHURCHES**

A PRELIMINARY STUDY

BY

FR. T. PAUL VERGHESE

1968

Published for

**The Standing Committee of the Conference
of Oriental Orthodox Churches,
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.**

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CHAPTER I

A. Introduction

Until 1582 the Churches, both East and West, followed basically the same calendar, however technically wrong that calendar might have been in itself.

It was in that year that Pope Gregory XIII introduced a reform of the calendar. Had the change been made a century earlier, i.e., before the Reformation in the western Church, the whole west at least may have followed the new calendar right away.

As it happened, even the Anglican Church took 170 years to adopt the new calendar officially. Most of the Orthodox have as yet not accepted the Gregorian Calendar even after

nearly 400 years, primarily because it was a schismatic pope who introduced the reform.*

But some Orthodox Churches, like those of Syria, India, Greece and other countries, have already adopted the new calendar thus introducing diversity of practice into the Orthodox family.

The following pages are submitted as an introduction to the problems involved in the reform of the Church calendar.

It is indeed a pity that while one part of the Orthodox Church is celebrating the great feast of the Resurrection of our Lord, another part **should** still be fasting. Even Christmas is no longer celebrated by all the Orthodox on the same day.

How did these differences come about? Is there some way of resolving the various views and finding a more uniform basis for the calendar in all the Eastern Churches? Such are the questions to which this brief pamphlet addresses itself.

B. The two problems

There are two problems involved here. Each must be solved separately and not be confused with each other.

* Pope Gregory XIII was a great jurist and educationist, and historically quite an important figure. But the Orthodox could not overlook the fact that he had an illegitimate son (Giacomo), and that he was a warlike pope who sought to enforce Catholicism on other countries through armed force and political intrigue.

There is first the problem of the Julian Calendar still followed by many Eastern Churches and the Gregorian Calendar which all Western Churches and some Eastern Churches have adopted. There is now a difference of 13 days between these two.

Second, there is the method of calculation of Easter Date. Easter is a "movable" feast unlike Christmas which comes on a fixed day, the 25th of December. But East and West followed a slightly different pattern for calculating the date of Easter. This also introduced considerable diversity, and still only very occasionally allows the dates calculated by the two methods to coincide.

We need to consider the two problems separately, because what we have today among the Orthodox Churches is a three-fold difference.

- (a) Some Orthodox Churches follow the ancient Eastern practice in both the calendar and the date of Easter.
- (b) Some have changed the calendar, but for the date of Easter, follow the ancient calendar and ancient Eastern pattern of calculating the date.
- (c) Some Orthodox Churches have accepted both the new calendar and the western way of calculating the date of Easter.

In order to introduce some uniformity in the world-wide Christian calendar, it seems essential that the Orthodox Churches understand the basis of their own present practice, and then proceed to whatever reforms they together regard as necessary and useful.

CHAPTER II.

THE CALENDAR

A. The Julian Calendar

The Calendar which the early Church followed was the one then current in the Graeco-Roman Empire. This was officially introduced by Julius Caesar in 46 B. C.

With the aid of the Egyptian astronomers at Alexandria, who were then the best experts in the field, Julius Caesar decided that the true length of the year* was 365 days and 6 hours. This was very difficult to calculate exactly in those days. For one had to mark a point in the Zodiac and then wait for a complete year to find out how long exactly it took for the sun to return to the same point in the Zodiac.

It was Julius Caesar who enacted that the civil year should be 365 days and that once in four years there should be a leap year with 366 days.

But the Alexandrian astronomers had made a slight mistake. The precise length of the year is 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes and 46 seconds,

*Note: for the ancients, an year = the time taken by the sun to make a complete circuit of the heaven, i.e., to the same point in the Zodiac from which it started on this journey. For us moderns, an year is the time taken by the earth to make a complete circuit in its orbit around the sun.

according to our more accurate modern calculations. Thus from 46 B. C. on, we have been incurring a discrepancy of 11 minutes and 14 seconds every year.

So, if we follow today (in 1968 A. D.) the Julian calendar, our calculations must be wrong by $1968 + 46 = 2014$ times 11 minutes and 14 seconds. This works out to an error of 15 days 22 hours 39 minutes and 36 seconds. In actual fact, however the discrepancy between the Julian Calendar and the Gregorian Calendar which we use in our Government and commercial work is only 13 days. This is due to another mistake, somewhat fortuitous, which occurred immediately after Caesar's death.

Caesar died in 44 B. C., i. e. the first leap year after the calendar reform. His followers did not quite understand Caesar's intention. So leap year was celebrated every third year, instead of every fourth year.

In 46 B. C. the vernal equinox occurred on March 25th, that is, the sun was observed to pass the spring equinox on that date. At the time of the council of Nicea, the vernal equinox was 4 days earlier, on March 21st. The error had accumulated by that time to four days. The council of Nicea fixed March 21st as the date of the spring equinox for purposes of calculating Easter.

In the thirteenth century the Julian Calendar was found to be wrong by 7 days, and by the

16th, the error had accumulated to ten days. In other words the spring equinox was observed to occur on the 11th of March, instead of on the 21st as fixed by Nicea.

B. The Gregorian Calendar

The calendar now followed by most governments, international agencies and the western Churches is the result of a reform initiated by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582, after many years of study and preparation. There had been demands for reform for many decades. But three problems had to be solved.

First there had to be an accurate calculation of the precise duration of the solar year. Second, there had to be some way of correcting the error already accrued through the centuries. Third a practical calendar had to be devised which would avoid the error in future.

(1) The amount of error had already been correctly ascertained by the 13th century. But it was only Pope Gregory in the 16th century who had the necessary courage and influence to suggest a concrete solution and get it accepted. Even the Roman Church's Councils of Constance, Basel, the Lateran (1511), yes not even the Council of Trent (1563) could only pass resolutions to the effect that the matter should be dealt with.

(2) Pope Gregory therefore decreed that the day following October 4th would be counted as

the 15th of October, in the year 1582. That reduced 10 days from the year, and brought the calendar up to date.

(3) He also decreed that not all the 'centurial' years, i.e., 1600, 1700, 1800 etc. would be leap years, even though they are all divisible by four. Only if the first two figures of the year are divisible by 4 then, they would be leap years. In other words 1600 is a leap year since 16 is a multiple of 4. But 1700, 1800 and 1900 are not leap years, because 17, 18 and 19 are not divisible by 4. The year 2000, however, would be a leap year since 20 is a multiple of 4.

All the Orthodox Churches refused to accept the Papal reform. Most of the Protestant States of Europe also did not first accept the New Style.

The difference at that time (1582) between the two Calendars was 10 days. By 1700, the difference had become one day more, since in that year the old style had 29 days in February while the New Style had only 28. In 1800 the difference was 12 days. By 1900 it became 13. It will remain 13 until the year 2100 when there will be 14 days difference.

By 1700 Germany and the Netherlands accepted the New Style; England and Sweden followed suit some 52 or 53 years later.

C. The Jewish Calendar

A word needs to be added about the Jewish calendar which is important for calculating the date of Easter.

The day is calculated differently in the western and Jewish calendars. For the west, the day is from midnight to midnight. For the people of Israel the day begins at sunset and ends at sunset (Lev. 23: 32). The day thus depends on the sun.

But the month is calculated on the basis of the moon.* The Hebrew month is from one new moon to another. In ancient times, the appearance of the New Moon had to be ascertained each month by a committee of the Sanhedrin and communicated to the people of Israel by fire-signals or special messengers.

Nowadays the Jewish month is calculated on the basis of an average time—namely 29 days 12 hours 44 minutes and $3\frac{1}{3}$ seconds. There are twelve months in the year adding up to a total of 354 days. The remaining ten days (or eleven in a leap year) add up in three years to a supplementary month called *we'adar*. In a 19-year cycle, the 3rd, 6th, 8th, 11th, 14th, 17th and 19th years have thus thirteen months adding up to 384 days per year.

It becomes clear then that the Jewish year is not computed by the sun alone, but on the

* The English word "month" comes from the word "moon"; the Hebrew words for month *Yerach* and *Chodesh* also mean moon and new moon respectively. The Jewish months have been followed in the early liturgical calendars of the Eastern Churches: Nisan, Iyyar, Siwan, Tammuz, Abh, Elul, Tishri, Heshwan, Kislew, Tebhet, Shabath, Adar.

basis of the lunar month. It is thus a luni-solar year.

We will need to refer to the Jewish Calendar when we come to the date of Easter.

D. The Metonic Cycle

The Greek (Athenian) Astronomer Meton who lived in the 5th century B. C. developed a formula of adjusting the relation between the solar year and the lunar month. This formula was used at Alexandria for calculating the date of the Jewish Passover and later the Christian Easter. This formula says :

19 solar years=235 lunar months.

This calculation is based on the same error as the Julian Calendar, namely that of regarding the solar year as 365 days and 6 hours.*

Thus the Metonic lunar month was computed to be :

$$\frac{19 \times 365.25}{235} = 29.530851 \text{ days}$$

But modern studies clearly show that the exact average for a lunar month is 29.530588 days. The difference between 29.530851 days

* Actually 29 days 12 hours 44 minutes 2.87 seconds. This average is accurate up to 500 years, and can help us to compute the date of Easter or Passover for five centuries at least.

and .29.530588 days seems quite insignificant, i. e., .000263 of a day. But such an insignificant difference accumulated over 308 years will amount to one whole day. In 400 A. D. it was discovered at Alexandria that the date of the full moon had gone wrong by about 5 days when computed according to the Metonic Cycle.

E. Adjustment of the Calendar

It is perhaps difficult, on theological or other grounds, to choose between Pope Gregory and Caesar Julius. The fact, however, that the Julian calendar has been hallowed by long-term use, makes it difficult to change the calendar abruptly. The Orthodox Churches have no common authority like the Pope who can change the practice of all the Eastern Churches by decree.

The important thing that seems necessary at the present stage is to educate the people. The Julian Calendar is pagan in origin. As a calendar it is wrong. Experts from the Coptic Church of Egypt have affirmed that the Gregorian Calendar is technically as correct as we can have it today.

The question later on would be to have a joint agreement of all the Eastern Churches to follow the Gregorian calendar, which is now adopted by all major governments and by all the international organizations. The Orthodox Churches will not be violating any conciliar

canon or theological point by accepting the Gregorian Calendar, after getting a few experts to verify its technical accuracy.

There is a slight error in the Gregorian calendar itself, it seems. The Gregorian year seems to be 26 seconds more than the more recent astronomical measurements. 26 seconds is about .0003009 of a day. It will take about 3500 years before the Gregorian calendar becomes wrong by one whole day.

If this technical data is found to be correct after investigation, then only official action by **the Churches** will be necessary in order to leave the erroneous Julian calendar and come back to the more correct Gregorian calendar which most of the world is now following.

Then we will not need two Christmases in Bethlehem, one on December 25th and the other on January 7th. We will all then be celebrating all the immovable or fixed feasts of the Church on the same day. Now there is a discrepancy of 13 days between the various Orthodox Churches themselves.

CHAPTER III

DATE OF EASTER

The uniform calculation of the date of Easter is a much more complex problem than that of unifying the calendar and the fixed feasts. There it is only a question of one calendar to be rectified on the basis of clear and precise technical data.

In the case of Easter, the matter has been a problem from the very beginning. There are two questions confronting us today. The first is: why did Easter become a movable feast? Could it not have been fixed on a day and month of the year? Why can't we move on to a fixed Easter date in our time? This question is being raised by many, including the World Council of Churches and Pope Paul VI.

The second question is: why do Western Easter and Eastern Easter sometimes fall on different dates? Can we not find a common pattern, so that Easter can be celebrated everywhere on the same day? If Christians cannot be united in celebrating the feast of the Resurrection together, then what unity could they ever have?

A. Fixity and Movability of Easter Date

Easter is, of course, the oldest Christian festival. This was the great day of joy and hope, of faith and victory for all Christians.

All the other important feasts of the early Church were calculated on the basis of the feast of the resurrection—Palm Sunday a week before, Good Friday 3 days before, Pentecost seven weeks later and so on.

Did not people know the month and the date of Christ's crucifixion? Yes, they did. It was either the 14th or the 15th of Nisan, either the day of the Jewish Passover or the day following.

But that was the Jewish calendar with its year consisting of 354 days, some years consisting of thirteen instead of 12 months. It was in the early centuries arbitrarily fixed by the Sanhedrim, as to which particular year should have the thirteenth month. One could therefore never be sure when the 14th or 15th of Nisan would actually be.

Those who did not follow the Jewish calendar found it difficult to fix one day for Easter in their calendar. There was no universal authority in the Church who could decree a fixed date for all the Churches. In the Roman Empire, "14th Nisan" would not even be understood. If the date had been fixed according to the Roman calendar (then the Julian calendar) then the date of the Christian Easter may become completely unrelated to the Passover. And for the early Christians, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the great Passover. The meaning of Christ's death was to be understood in connection with the feast of Passover. So they

were averse to fixing a date like the second Sunday in April or anything of that sort. Easter had to be celebrated at the time of the Passover.

That was the view of the Palestinian Christians, including the Apostles, all of whom were Jews. The practice in these lands was then to celebrate the crucifixion on the 15th day of Nisan (the day following the Jewish Passover) and the Resurrection on the 17th. It did not matter to them whether the 15th and 17th were a Friday and Sunday respectively.

Elsewhere in the Empire, the Christians held to a slightly different view. From the beginning the universal Church celebrated the first day of the week, i. e., every Sunday as the weekly feast of the Resurrection. As for the annual feast, since the resurrection actually took place on the Sunday after Nisan 14th, the Church decided to celebrate every year the Sunday after the 14th of Nisan as the feast of the Resurrection. This was first the practice of Rome and Alexandria—the Latin and Coptic Churches. They however, for the sake of independence from the Jewish calendar, later formulated that Easter should be celebrated on

“the first Sunday after the full moon after the spring equinox.”

The Roman Church claimed that this was decreed on the authority of St. Peter and St. Paul. But even in Rome and Alexandria

the feast did not always fall on the same day. In Rome the spring equinox was on March 25th in the earlier period, while in Alexandria it was March 21st.

The practice of the Syrian Church was somewhat different. In Antioch, Easter was celebrated on the Sunday after the Jewish passover.

In France (Gaul) they decided to follow a fixed date, i. e., the 25th of March for the crucifixion and the 27th for the resurrection.*

The Montanists in Asia Minor kept Easter on the Sunday after April 6th.

Some of the earliest controversies in the Church were about the date of Easter. There was no unanimity of opinion or uniformity of practice before the Council of Nicea in 325. We have a very clear account of what happened at the end of the second century. Let us quote the relevant passage from Eusebius' Church History**.

“A question of no small importance arose at that time. § For the parishes of all Asia, as from an older tradition, held that the fourteenth

* Marinus Dumiensis, in *Patrologia Latina* LXXII, 47-51.

** Bk. V Ch. 23ff.

§ At that time means about A. D. 190 when Serapion (the eighth from the Apostles) was Bishop of Antioch, Demetrius Bishop of Alexandria and Victor Bishop of Rome.

day of the moon, on which day the Jews were commanded to sacrifice the lamb, should be observed as the feast of the Saviour's passover. It was therefore necessary to end their fast on that day, whatever day of the week it should happen to be. But it was not the custom of the Churches in the rest of the world to end it at this time, as they observed the practice which, from apostolic tradition, has prevailed to the present time, of terminating the fast on no other day than on that of the resurrection of our Saviour.

“Synods and assemblies of bishops were held on this account, and all, with one consent, through mutual correspondence drew up an ecclesiastical decree, that the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be celebrated on no other but the Lord's day, and that we should observe the close of the paschal fast on this day only. There is still extant a writing of those who were then assembled in Palestine, over whom Theophilus, bishop of Caesarea, and Narcissus, bishop of Jerusalem, presided. And there is also another writing extant of those who were assembled at Rome to consider the same question, which bears the name of Bishop Victor, also of the bishops in Pontus over whom Palmas, as the oldest, presided; and of the parishes in Gaul of which Irenaeus was bishop, and of those in Osrhoene and the cities there; and a personal letter of Bacchylus, bishop of the Church at Corinth, and of a great many others, who uttered the same opinion and

judgment, and cast the same vote. And that which has been given above was their unanimous decision.

B. The Disagreement in Asia

“But the bishops of Asia, led by Polycrates, decided to hold to the old custom handed down to them. He himself, in a letter which he addressed to Victor and the Church of Rome, set forth in the following words the tradition which had come down to him.

“We observe the exact day; neither adding, nor taking away. For in Asia also great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the day of the Lord’s coming, when he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall seek out all the saints. Among these are Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who fell asleep in Hierapolis; and his two aged virgin daughters, and another daughter, who lived in the Holy Spirit and now rests at Ephesus; and, moreover, John who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord, and, being a priest, wore the sacerdotal plate. He fell asleep at Ephesus. And Polycarp in Smyrna, who was a bishop and martyr; and Thraseas, bishop, and martyr from Eumenia, who fell asleep in Smyrna. Why need I mention the bishop and martyr Sagaris who fell asleep in Laodicea, or the blessed Papirius, or Melito, the Eunuch who lived altogether in the Holy Spirit, and who lies in Sardis, awaiting the episcopate from

heaven, when he shall rise from the dead? All these observed the fourteenth day of the pass-over according to the Gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith. And I also, Polycrates, the least of you all, do according to the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have closely followed. For seven of my relatives were bishops; and I am the eighth. And my relatives always observed the day when the people put away the leaven. I, therefore, brethren, who have lived sixty-five years in the Lord, and have met with the brethren throughout the world, and have gone through every Holy Scripture, am not affrighted by terrifying words. For those greater than I have said 'We ought to obey God rather than man'. He then writes of all the bishops who were present with him and thought as he did. His words are as follows.—

“ ‘I could mention the bishops who were present, whom I summoned at your desire, whose names, should I write them, would constitute a great multitude. And they beholding my littleness, gave their consent to the letter, knowing that I did not bear my gray hairs in vain, but had always governed my life by the Lord Jesus.’

“Thereupon Victor, who presided over the church at Rome, immediately attempted to cut off from the common unity the parishes of all Asia, with the churches that agreed with them, as heterodox; and he wrote letters and declared all the brethren there wholly excommunicate.

But this did not please all the bishops. And they besought him to consider the things of peace, and of neighbourly unity and love. Words of theirs are extant, sharply rebuking Victor. Among them was Irenaeus, who, sending letters in the name of the brethren in Gaul over whom he presided, maintained that the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be observed only on the Lord's day. He fittingly admonishes Victor that he should not cut off whole churches of God which observed the tradition of an ancient custom, and after many other words he proceeds as follows :

““For the controversy is not only concerning the day, but also concerning the very manner of the fast. For some think that they should fast one day, other two, yet others more ; some, moreover, count their day as consisting of forty hours day and night. And this variety in its observance has not originated in our time ; but long before in that of our ancestors. It is likely that they did not hold to strict accuracy, and thus formed a custom for their posterity according to their own simplicity and peculiar mode. Yet all of these lived none the less in peace, and we also live in peace with one another ; and the disagreement in regard to the fast confirms the agreement in the faith.”

“He adds to this the following account, which I may properly insert :

‘Among these were the presbyters before Soter, who presided over the church which thou

now rulest. We mean Anicetus, and Pius, and Hyginus, and Telesphorus, and Xystus. They neither observed it themselves, nor did they permit those after them to do so. And yet though not observing it, they were none the less at peace with those who came to them from the parishes in which it was observed ; although this observance was more opposed to those who did not observe it. But none were ever cast out on account of this form ; but the presbyters before thee who did not observe it, sent the eucharist to those of other parishes who observed it. And when the blessed Polycarp was at Rome in the time of Anicetus, and they disagreed a little about certain other things, they immediately made peace with one another, not caring to quarrel over this matter. For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe what he had always observed with John the disciple of our Lord, and the other apostles with whom he had associated ; neither could Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it, as he said that he ought to follow the customs of the presbyters that had preceded him. But though matters were in this shape, they communed together, and Anicetus conceded the administration of the eucharist in the church to Polycarp, manifestly as a mark of respect. And they parted from each other in peace, both those who observed, and those who did not, maintaining the peace of the whole church.’

“ Thus Irenaeus, who truly was well named, became a peacemaker in this matter, exhorting

and negotiating in this way in behalf of the peace of the churches. And he conferred by letter about this mooted question, not only with Victor, but also with most of the other rulers of the churches.

How All Came to an Agreement respecting the Passover

“Those in Palestine whom we have recently mentioned, Narcissus and Theophilus, and with them Cassius, bishop of the church of Tyre, and Clarus of the church of Ptolemais, and those who met with them, having stated many things respecting the tradition concerning the passover which had come to them in succession from the apostles, at the close of their writing add these words :

“ ‘ Endeavor to send copies of our letter to every church, that we may not furnish occasion to those who easily deceive their souls. We show you indeed that also in Alexandria they keep it on the same day that we do. For letters are carried from us to them and from them to us, so that in the same manner and at the same time we keep the sacred day. ’ ”

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The dispute was mainly between the churches of Asia Minor on the one side and the rest of Christendom on the other.

Asian Christians, appealing to the authority of the “ Apostles John and Philip ” celebrated the crucifixion on Nisan 14th, by fasting the

whole of that day (not necessarily a Friday). They had a communion Eucharist at the close of the day recalling the paschal sacrifice of Christ.

The Roman Church, and most of the rest of Christendom celebrated the crucifixion always on a Friday, and the resurrection on the Sunday following. They fasted Friday and Saturday. The Asians broke their fast on the evening of the 14th Nisan, which is usually a few days before the Good Friday and Easter of the rest of Christendom.

This gave rise to a heated controversy in which the great Fathers like Polycarp took part, as we see from Ireneus' account of it quoted by Eusebius.

Actually the controversy raged throughout the second century. Pope Victor of Rome insisted that the Roman practice should be normative for all the churches of the world. The Asians definitely refused. It was only at the council of Nicea that the matter was finally settled.

C. The Council of Nicea (325 A. D.)

What the great council of Nicea decided on the matter of Easter date we do not know definitely. The canons of Nicea in this regard are lost to us. What we do have is the circular letter of the Emperor Constantine to all those who were present at the council. We give below

the main body of this letter as it is found in Eusebius' life of Constantine (Bk. 3, paras 18—20):—

“When the question relative to the sacred festival of Easter arose, it was universally thought that it would be convenient that all should keep the feast on one day; for what could be more beautiful and more desirable, than to see this festival, through which we receive the hope of immortality, celebrated by all with one accord, and in the same manner? **It was declared** to be particularly unworthy for **this**, the holiest of all festivals, to follow the custom (the calculation) of the Jews, who had soiled their hands with the most fearful of crimes, and whose minds were blinded. In rejecting their custom, we may transmit to our descendants the legitimate mode of celebrating Easter, which we have observed from the time of the Saviour's Passion to the present day (according to the day of the week). We ought not therefore, to have anything in common with the Jews, for the Saviour has shown us another way; our worship follows a more legitimate and more convenient course (the order of the days of the week); and consequently, in unanimously adopting this mode, we desire, dearest brethren, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews, for it is truly shameful for us to hear them boast that without their direction we could not keep this feast. How can they be in the right, they who after the death of the Saviour, have no longer been led by reason but

by wild violence, as their delusion may urge them? They do not possess the truth in this Easter question; for, in their blindness and repugnance to all improvements, they frequently celebrate two passovers in the same year. We could not imitate those who are openly in error. How, then, could we follow these Jews, who are most certainly blinded by error? For to celebrate the passover twice in one year is totally inadmissible. But even if this were not so, it would still be your duty not to tarnish your soul by communications with such wicked people (the Jews). Besides, consider well, that in such an important matter, and on a subject of such great solemnity, there ought not to be any division. Our Saviour has left us only *one* festal day of our redemption, that is to say, of his holy passion, and he desired (to establish) only *one* Catholic Church. Think, then how unseemly it is, that on the same day some should be fasting whilst others are seated at a banquet; and that after Easter, some should be rejoicing at feasts, whilst others are still observing a strict fast. For this reason, a Divine Providence wills that this custom should be rectified and regulated in a uniform way; and everyone, I hope, will agree upon this point. As on the one hand, it is our duty not to have anything in common with the murderers of our Lord; and as, on the other, the custom now followed by the Churches of the West, of the South, and of the North, and by some of these of the East, is the most acceptable, it has appeared good to all; and I have been guarantee for your consent, that you would

accept it with joy, as it is followed at Rome, in Africa, in all Italy, Egypt, Spain, Gaul, Britain, Libya, in all Achaia, and in the dioceses of Asia, of Pontus, and Cilicia. You should consider not only that the number of churches in these provinces make a majority, but also that it is right to demand what our reason approves, and that we should have nothing in common with the Jews. To sum up in few words : By the unanimous judgment of all, it has been decided that the most holy festival of Easter should be everywhere celebrated on one and the same day, and it is not seemly that in so holy a **thing there** should be any division. As this is **the state of the case**, accept joyfully the divine favour, and this truly divine command ; for all which takes place in assemblies of the bishops ought to be regarded as proceeding from the will of God. Make known to your brethren what has been decreed, keep this most holy day at the same time, if it is granted me, as I desire, to unite myself with you ; we can rejoice, together, seeing that the divine power has made use of our instrumentality for destroying the evil designs of the devil, and thus causing faith, peace, and unity to flourish amongst us. May God graciously protect you, my beloved brethren ”*

*Eng. Tr. in Hefele, *History of the Church Councils*, Second Edn. Vol. 1, Edinburgh, 1894 pp 322—324. The full document is also given in Socrates' *Ecclesiastical History* Bk. 1 chapter IX. Eng. Tr. London, George Bell & Sons, 1880 pp 32—34. It is also found in Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers. Series II, Vol. XIV, pp. 54—55.

The Encyclical letter issued by the council itself is given in the Church History of Socrates (1:9). We quote only the brief passage relating to the date of Easter.

“We have also gratifying intelligence to communicate to you relative to unity of judgment on the subject of the most holy feast of Easter: for this point also has been happily settled through your prayers; so that all the brethren in the East who have heretofore kept this festival when the Jews did, will henceforth conform to the Romans and to us, and to all who from the earliest time have observed our period of celebrating Easter. Rejoicing therefore in this most desirable conclusion, and in the general unanimity and peace, as well as in the extirpation of all heresy, receive with greater honour and more abundant love our fellow minister and your bishop Alexander...”*

Socrates also affirms, in another connection, that Nicea did not alter the date of Easter.

“They talk at random therefore who assert that the time of keeping Easter was altered in the Nicene Synod, for the bishops there convened earnestly laboured to reduce the first dissident minority to uniformity of practice with the rest of the people.”§

But it is obvious that even in the days of Socrates (380–450 A. D.) the controversy had

* *op. cit.* pp. 28.

§ *ibid.* Bk. V Ch. 22. Eng. Tr. *op. cit.* p. 292.

not been fully settled, for Socrates says in Bk. V chapter XXII of his ecclesiastical history.

“I may perhaps be permitted here to make a few reflections on Easter. It appears to me that neither the ancients nor moderns who have affected to follow the Jews, have had any rational foundation for contending so obstinately about it. For they have altogether lost sight of the fact, that when our religion superseded the Jewish economy, the obligation to observe the Mosaic law and the ceremonial types ceased. That it is incompatible with Christian faith to practise Jewish rites, is manifest from the apostle’s expressly forbidding it; and not only rejecting circumcision, but also deprecating contention about festival days. In his Epistle to the Galatians he writes, “Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law?” And continuing his train of argument, he demonstrates that the Jews were in bondage as servants, but that Christians are called into the liberty of sons. Moreover he exhorts them to disregard days, and months, and years. Again, in his epistle to the Colossians he distinctly declares that such observances are merely shadows: wherefore he says, “Let no man judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of any holy-day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days; which are a shadow of things to come.” The same truths are also confirmed by him in the Epistle to the Hebrews, in these words: “For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a

change also of the law.” Neither the apostle therefore, nor the evangelists, have anywhere imposed the yoke of servitude on those who have embraced the gospel ; but have left Easter and every other feast to be honoured by the gratitude of the recipients of grace. Men love festivals, because they afford them cessation from labour ; and therefore it is that each individual in every place, according to his own pleasure, has by a prevalent custom celebrated the memory of the saving passion. The Saviour and his apostles have enjoined us by no law to keep this feast ; nor in the New Testament are we threatened with any penalty, punishment, or curse for the neglect of it, as the Mosaic law does the Jews. It is merely for the sake of historical accuracy, and for the reproach of the Jews, because they polluted themselves with blood on their very feasts, that it is recorded in the Gospels that our Saviour suffered “ in the days of unleavened bread ”. The apostles had no thought of appointing festival days, but of promoting a life of blamelessness and piety. And it seems to me that the feast of Easter has been introduced into the Church from some old usage, just as many other customs have been established. In Asia Minor most people kept the fourteenth day of the moon, disregarding the sabbath : yet they never separated from those who did otherwise, until Victor, bishop of Rome, influenced by too ardent a zeal, fulminated a sentence of excommunication against the Quartodecimans in Asia. But Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in France, severely censured

Victor by letter for his immoderate heat ; telling him that although the ancients differed in their celebration of Easter, they did not depart from intercommunion. Also that Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, who afterwards suffered martyrdom under Gordian, continued to communicate with Anicetus, bishop of Rome although he himself, according to the usage of his country, kept Easter on the fourteenth day of the moon, as Eusebius attests in the fifth Book of his "Ecclesiastical History". While therefore some in Asia Minor observed the day above-mentioned, others in the East kept that feast on the ~~sabbath~~ **sabbath** indeed, but not in the same month. The former thought the Jews should be followed, though they were not exact : the latter kept Easter after the equinox, refusing to be guided by the Jews ; 'for,' said they, "it ought to be celebrated when the sun is in Aries, in the month which the Antiochians term Xanthicus, and the Romans April." In this practice, they averred, they conformed not to the modern Jews, who are mistaken in almost everything, but to the ancients of that nation, and what Josephus has written in the third Book of his "Jewish Antiquities". Thus these people were at issue. But all other Christians in the Western parts, as far as the ocean itself, are found to have celebrated Easter after the equinox, from a very ancient tradition, and have never disagreed on this subject. It is not true, as some have pretended, that the synod under Constantine altered this festival : for that emperor himself, writing to those who differed respecting it,

recommended them as few in number, to agree with the majority of their brethren. His letter is given at length by Eusebius in his third Book of the Life of that sovereign; but the part relative to Easter runs thus:— ‘It is a becoming order, which all the Churches in the Western, Southern, and Northern parts of the world observe, and some places in the East also. Wherefore all on the present occasion have judged it right, and I have pledged myself that it will have the acquiescence of your prudence, that what is unanimously observed in the city of Rome, throughout Italy, Africa, and Egypt, in Spain, France, Britain, Libya, and all Greece, the Asian and Pontic diocese, and Cilicia, your wisdom also will readily embrace; considering not only that the number of Churches in the aforesaid places is greater, but also that while there should be a universal concurrence in what is most reasonable, it becomes us to have nothing in common with the perfidious Jews.’ Such is the tenor of the emperor’s letter. Moreover the Quartodecimans affirm that the observance which they maintain was delivered to them by the apostle John; while the Romans and those in the Western parts assure us that their usage originated with the apostles Peter and Paul. Neither of these parties however can produce any written testimony in confirmation of what they assert. But that the time of keeping Easter in various places is dependent on usage, I infer from this, that those who agree in faith, differ among themselves on this question. And it will not perhaps be unreasonable to notice here the

diversity of customs in the Churches. The fasts before Easter are differently observed. Those at Rome fast three successive weeks before Easter, excepting Saturdays and Sundays. The Illyrians, Achaïans and Alexandrians observe a fast of six weeks, which they term 'the forty days' fast'. Others commencing their fast from the seventh week before Easter, and fasting three five days only, and that at intervals, yet call that time 'the forty days' fast'. It is indeed surprising that, thus differing in the number of days, they should both give it one common appellation; but some assign **one reason** for it, and others another, according to **their several fancies**. There is also a disagreement about abstinence from food, as well as the number of days. Some wholly abstain from things that have life: others feed on fish only of all living creatures: many, together with fish, eat fowl also, saying that, according to Moses, these were likewise made out of the waters. Some abstain from eggs, and all kinds of fruits; others feed on dry bread only; and others eat not even this; while others, having fasted till the ninth hour, afterwards feed on any sort of food without distinction. And among various nations there are other usages, for which innumerable reasons are assigned. Since however no one can produce a written command as an authority, it is evident that the apostles left each one to his own free-will in the matter, to the end that the performance of what is good might not be the result of constraint and necessity. Nor is there less variation in the services

performed in their religious assemblies, than there is about fastings. For although almost all Churches throughout the world celebrate the sacred mysteries on the sabbath of every week, yet the Christians of Alexandria and at Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, refused to do this. The Egyptians in the neighbourhood of Alexandria, and the inhabitants of Thebasis, hold their religious meetings on the sabbath, but do not participate of the mysteries in the manner usual among Christians in general: for after having eaten and satisfied themselves with food of all kinds, in the evening, making their oblations, they partake of the mysteries. At Alexandria again, on the 4th Feria, (i. e. the Wednesday in Passion week,) and on that termed the Preparation day, the Scriptures are read, and the doctors expound them; and all the usual services are performed in their assemblies, except the celebration of the mysteries. This practice in the city is of great antiquity, for it is well known that Origen most commonly taught in the church on these days. He being very learned in the sacred books, and perceiving that the impotency of the Mosaic Law could not be explained literally, gave it a spiritual interpretation; declaring that there has never been but one true Passover, which our Saviour celebrated when he hung upon the cross: for that he then vanquished the adverse powers and erected this trophy against the devil."

Though we do not have the words of the decree of Nicea, the documents cited above

clearly demonstrate the following points as laid down by the First Ecumenical Council:

- (a) all Christians should keep the feast of Easter on one and the same date
- (b) it should always be on a Sunday
- (c) the calculation of the Christian Easter should not be dependent on the caprices of the Jewish Calendar which is intercalated irregularly by the sanhedrin
- (d) care should be taken however to see that the Christian Easter does not fall on the same day as the Jewish passover.
- (e) the calculation of Easter date should be related to the solar equinox, so that there can never be two Easters in one solar year, even if that year has two Jewish passovers.

From St. Cyril of Alexandria, who died in 447 A. D. we learn that

“ the General Synod (of Nicea) has unanimously decreed that, since the Church of Alexandria is experienced in such sciences, she should announce by letter every year to the Roman Church the day on which Easter should be celebrated so that the whole Church might thus learn the time for the festival through Apostolical authority.”*

This principle, namely that the date of Easter should be calculated at Alexandria, and

* Hefele *History of the Councils* Vol. I p. 326.

that the Bishop of Rome should make it known to all, is corroborated by western writers like Pope Leo I and Ambrose of Milan.

If this is so, then it is fairly safe to assume that the Alexandrian practice was the one which was accepted by the Council of Nicea as normative for all Christians. In concrete terms then the Decision of Nicea was that the whole of Christendom should celebrate the feast of Easter on

**THE SUNDAY FOLLOWING THE FIRST FULL MOON
AFTER THE SPRING EQUINOX(i. e., March 21st)**

This solution is the one now followed by both west and east, but there is still discrepancy between East and West.

CHAPTER IV

WHY STILL DISCREPANCY?

The Nicene solution did not by any means settle the issue. Rome and Alexandria could not agree, even though they both used the same Julian Calendar and the same Nicene formula. And the difficulty continues right up to our time. Why? It is interesting and useful to continue looking at the post-Nicene period, to see clearly our own problem today.

It is a fact that even in 326, i. e., in the year following the Council of Nicea, as well as in 330, 333, 340, 341 and 343 the Latins celebrated Easter on a different day from the Alexandrians. There were four reasons for the discrepancy.

First, the beginning of the solar year. If one begins at the end of the 360 days, or 12 months of the previous year, one comes to a different date than if you start after the 'epact' (the surplus days in each year). Alexandrians followed a different method from the Romans who always began on the first day (*feria prima*) of January.

Second, the Roman calculation of the full moon as well as the Alexandrian, were both wrong—the Romans placed it a bit too soon, and the Alexandrians a bit too late.

Third, the equinox was fixed differently in Rome and in Alexandria. In the 4th century Rome had its spring equinox on March 18th, the Alexandrians on the 21st.

Fourth, if the first full moon after the spring equinox fell on a Saturday, the Romans did not celebrate the Easter the following day, for fear it would coincide with the Jewish passover.**

So, some 18 years after the council of Nicea, which sought to reconcile the Asians with the Romans and Alexandrians, the council of Sardica (343 A. D.) sought to reconcile the Romans and Alexandrians with each other. After much persuasion, they agreed to a common date for Easter for the following 50 years. But the recrudescence of the Arian controversy prevented the compromise from being observed after a few years.

In 387, we find the gap between the Alexandrian Easter and the Roman one to be as long as five weeks. The Romans celebrated Easter on March 21st, when the Alexandrians were still in the early weeks of lent, for in Egypt Easter that year fell on April 25th. Why?

For the Romans, March 18th was the spring equinox. The full moon, let us say, was on the 20th. The 21st was a Sunday. So they were following the Nicene formula—it was “the first

** Hefele, *op. cit.* pp. 328 ff

Sunday after the first full moon following the spring equinox.”

For the Alexandrians March 21st was the spring equinox. The next full moon, according to their calculation, fell on April 20th, let us say. The first Sunday after that would be April 25th. So they were also following the Nicene formula—“the first Sunday after the first full moon following the spring equinox.”

The Emperor, Theodosius the Great, wishing to reconcile the two groups, asked the Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria for an explanation of the difference. The Patriarch produced a full explanation, and worked out the date of Easter on that basis, for several years to come. Unfortunately we are not in possession of the main body of Theophilus' reply, but have only the introduction.

It was Theophilus' nephew, St. Cyril, who abridged the reply of his uncle, and gave the dates of Easter for 95 years, i. e. from 436–531. St. Cyril wrote to the Pope of Rome to explain what was wrong with the Rome calculation. Ambrose of Milan was asked by Rome to give his views on the date of Easter in 387. He gave his verdict in favour of the Alexandrian calculation, i. e. April 25th. Other bishops also appealed to the bishop of Rome to follow the calculations of Alexandria.

The Pope finally gave in, but only in the mid-fifth century. Leo I acknowledged to the

Emperor that the Alexandrian calculation was the correct one.* Rome now accepts March 21st as the date of the spring equinox, and seems to acknowledge also the Metonic Cycle followed at Alexandria (see p. 10) as the more accurate way of calculating the lunar months.**

The Date of Easter Today

Today, the Orthodox Churches, especially those that accept the Gregorian Calendar for the fixed feasts (i. e. celebrating Christmas on December 25th) and yet follow the ancient pattern of calculating the date of Easter, seem to be involved in a major inconsistency.

The East agrees with the West, or I should say, the west has agreed with the east, that March 21st should be the date of the Vernal Equinox. But since some churches still follow the erroneous Julian calendar, for them March 21st falls on April 3rd (according to the more accurate Gregorian calendar). And for these, Easter therefore has always to be after April 3rd.

It is quite clear as a mathematical fact that the spring equinox is on March 21st, not on April 3rd. This can be checked by scientific observation. There is no theological dispute involved

* Leo was Pope in Rome at the time of the council of Chalcedon (451 A. D.). His letter to Emperor Marcian appears in *Patrologia Latina* LIV, col. 1055

** Formally, however, the Metonic Cycle was accepted by Rome only about 525 A. D.

here. The question is purely technical. The Orthodox churches which celebrate Easter according to the ancient Nicene decision, have to calculate the date of Easter on the basis of the "first Sunday after the first full-moon (the 14th of the Lunar month, Nisan) after the Vernal equinox. If we take April 3rd to be the Vernal equinox, then we are definitely making a technical mistake.

The calculation of the 14th of the Lunar month may be a little more problematic today. The Metonic Cycle seems to be somewhat inaccurate scientifically. The Alexandrian system which we all follow, still uses the Metonic Cycle to calculate the Lunar month. Our present calculation based on the Metonic Cycle should be at least five days wrong.

But we do have the scientific means at our disposal to fix the Lunar month accurately for some 500 years to come on the simple basis that a Lunar month = 29.530588 solar days or 29 days 12 hours, 44 minutes and 2.87 seconds.

What is needed today therefore, seems to be a series of simple actions by the churches, in the name of unity at least in the date of observing the Feast of our Lord's Resurrection.

CHAPTER V

SOME PRACTICAL PROPOSALS

The following proposals are advanced in a private capacity by a simple priest of the Syrian Orthodox church of the East, from his particular perspective, for the consideration of the authorities of all the Christian churches:

- (1) all Christian churches should declare officially that they are in favour of a unified date for the celebration of Easter.
- (2) all Christian churches should agree that the only practical way of achieving this unified date is to follow the Nicene decree, which stated fully and accurately seems to be :

THAT THE ANNUAL FEAST OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST IS TO BE CELEBRATED BY ALL CHRISTIANS ON THE FIRST SUNDAY FOLLOWING THE FOURTEENTH OF THE PASCHAL LUNAR MONTH. i. e. the Sunday following the first full-moon after the 21st of March.

- (3) Decide together whether the ancient provision that if the Sunday following the 14th of the Paschal Lunar month coincide with the Jewish Passover, Easter should be postponed to the following Sunday should still be observed or not.
- (4) The Oriental Orthodox churches, especially those of Egypt and Ethiopia,

should restudy the question of the Julian and Gregorian calendars, and adopt the more accurate Gregorian calendar, after having well prepared their people for this change. This should be done carefully, but without vacillating, for it is a matter of truth.

- (5) The Orthodox churches in communion with Constantinople should take similar action at a conciliar level to introduce the Gregorian calendar. Certain churches like those of Russia, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia may require careful education of their people before this is done.
- (6) Once consonance of the Church calendar with the civil calendar has been achieved, the Easter date problem can be solved easily by the following steps.
 - (a) all should agree that March 21st is the Vernal Equinox.
 - (b) all should agree on the accurate Lunar month being 29.530588 days.
 - (c) a joint commission of the churches should declare the dates of Easter for the coming 130 years (until the year 2100 A. D.).
 - (d) such a commission be appointed jointly by the World Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and other Churches which are not members of the

World Council. The appeal for the appointment of such a commission should come from at least the following people together:

1. The Presidents of the World Council of Churches, its Chairman of Central Committee and its General Secretary.
2. The Pope of the Roman Catholic church and the Chairman of Roman Catholic National Episcopal conferences.
3. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople and the Heads of autocephalous Orthodox churches in communion with him.
4. The Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria and the four other Patriarchs and Catholicoi of the Oriental Orthodox churches.
5. The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Presiding Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal church.
6. The President of the Lutheran World Federation.
7. The President of the World Alliance of Reformed churches.
8. The President of the World Methodist Council.
9. The President of the Baptist World Alliance.

10. The President of the World Evangelical Fellowship.
11. The Chairman of the National Association of Evangelicals.
12. The Heads of other world-wide bodies (Congregational, Disciples, Mennonite, Pentecostal, etc.).
13. The Head of the Salvation Army.
14. Chairman, Friends' World Committee for Consultation.
15. Any other signatories necessary for ensuring universal representativeness.

One could anticipate some resistance in certain pockets of the Orthodox churches to such a proposal. It would be particularly necessary that the Orthodox churches are fully prepared and educated in the complexities of the problem.

These proposals are submitted to the wisdom of the God-appointed leaders of all churches. These will certainly need considerable modification before they are finally put into effect. The intention of the present pamphlet is simply to promote discussion and facilitate action by the authorities of the Churches.

A Concluding Word

There are two problems in relation to the Christian calendar, we said at the beginning. The two are actually quite closely inter-related, as we have seen.

The problem before the Orthodox churches is of a purely scientific and technical nature—that of adopting an accurate calendar for the solar year, and an accurate formula for the Lunar month.

These are matters actually for Astronomers, not for a theologian. It would be useful if some competent Orthodox Astronomers could give their technical view.

There is of course some work for the historian. It is as a historian that we have sought to look at the problem of calendar reform.

It seems clear that if we follow the decisions of Nicea as can be accurately ascertained by a historian and the verdict of astronomers on the solar and lunar aspects of the calendar, we should have a uniform practice in the matter of the major festivals of the church.

The final action, as well as perhaps the initiating action, does not lie with the historian or the astronomer, but with the authorities and people of the Churches. It is to them that this pamphlet is humbly submitted.
